

Schools as Learning Communities? Leadership through Appreciative Inquiry

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Abstract

This paper outlines evidence emphasizing the importance of educational leaders prioritizing the development of ‘learning communities’ within the staff and students at their schools. It suggests that although schools are most certainly institutes of learning in terms of the classroom processes they create for their students, that there is some question as to whether schools as organizations can be accurately described as ‘learning communities’. It goes on to describe an innovative leadership project that involved the directors of adolescent focused NGO’s (non-government organizations) in Aotearoa, New Zealand where leaders used Appreciative Inquiry (AI) processes to explore their own leadership through the development of a ‘learning community’. This article focuses on how the two guiding principles of ‘positive focus’ and ‘collaboration’ enabled growth trajectories where participants gained agency to co-create a highly productive learning space. Five key strategies are identified: 1. flexible and negotiated structure, 2. sharing powerful stories, 3. cycles of exploration, 4. individual and collective reflection and 5. significant time frame. The paper then makes suggestions for how these strategies could be used in the development of such a ‘learning community’ in a school setting.

Introduction

This article outlines evidence emphasizing the importance of educational leaders prioritizing the development of ‘learning communities’ within the staff and students at their schools. It draws on findings from an innovative research project that supported directors of adolescent focused NGO’s in Aotearoa, New Zealand in the exploration of their leadership. The 25 participants in this project lead organizations of 30–80 staff in a

range of educational, recreational and therapeutic settings. The participants explored their leadership as a peer supported learning community that made use of appreciative inquiry methodologies. In this project two key questions were addressed:

- (1) What beliefs, values and actions characterize leaders in adolescent - focused NGO's in Aotearoa, New Zealand?
- (2) How does exploring NGO leadership by appreciative inquiry impact our practice?

This paper is focused on the findings in relation to question 2, and looks specifically at the process that emerged around the exploration of leadership, namely the creation of a vibrant learning community amongst the leaders participating in the project. It explores the ways in which the themes of “positive focus” and “collaboration” enabled growth trajectories where participants gained agency to co-create a highly productive learning space. It describes how insights regarding creating learning communities were also directly applicable as leadership strategies in each of the participant's own organizations. The article then makes suggestions for how the development of such a ‘learning community’ might be approached in a school setting.

Rationale

In November 2009, The New Zealand Ministry of Education released the findings of its Best Evidence Synthesis (BES.) for Principals: “*School Leadership and Student Outcomes – identifying what works and why*”. The study links leadership actions and attributes to student achievement in secondary schooling. The BES synthesizes the international literature using both qualitative and quantitative methods and concludes that there are five key determinants that link leaders' behavior to student achievement. Of these, Dimension 4, with the largest effect size of 0.84, (more than twice that of the next determinant), is:

Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development - Ko te waka Matauranga, he waka eke noa - Dimension 4 - (Robinson, Hohepa, Lloyd, 2009, pp. 15).

The BES authors suggest that effective leadership promotes teacher learning via communities that are focused on improving student success (Robinson et al, 2009). Further findings in the BES point to complementary factors that contribute to developing such professional learning communities namely: (1) Engage in open-to-learning conversations (Robinson, 2009, pp. 75) and (2) Create a community that learns how to improve student success (Robinson, 2009, pp.120).

It is interesting to note that both of these concepts highlight the role of educational leaders in fostering 'teacher learning' and the creation of a 'learning community'. Schools are most certainly institutes of learning in terms of the classroom processes they create for their students but could schools as organizations be accurately described as 'learning communities'? The BES highlights this potential mismatch by stating that; "To establish such communities, leaders may need to challenge or change cultures that are not focused on collegial discussion of the relationship between what is taught and what is learned (Robinson et al, 2009, pp.42)."

In his book, 'The Fifth Discipline', Peter Senge writes about learning communities and coins the term 'learning organization' where:

"People continually expand their capacities to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together. It is no longer sufficient to have one person learning for the organization, a Ford or a Gates. It's just not possible any longer to figure it out from the top, and have everyone else following the order of the 'grand strategist'. The organizations that will readily excel in the future will be the organizations that discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels of the organization (Senge, 2002)."

This learning organization concept has significant implications for leadership roles. Pascale (2000) for example suggests that the leader's role in such organizations in that of 'context setter':

"Top down strategies don't win too many ball games these days – we need a different definition of strategy and a different way to generate it. In the past, strategy was the exclusive domain of the senior management team.....but the top can't possibly have all the answers. The leaders provide the vision and are the context setters. But the actual solutions of how to best to meet the challenges of the moment have to be made by the people closest to the action – the people at the coal face. The leader becomes a context setter, the designer of a learning experience – not an authority figure with solutions. Once the folks at grassroots level realize they own the problem, they also discover that they can help create and own the answer – and they get it very quickly ... very creativity, with a lot more ideas than the old-style strategic direction could ever have prescribed from the headquarters."

Senge contrasts the role of 'context setter' with the role of the 'traditional' leader. Traditional leaders, he argues, are special people who set the direction, make the key decisions and energize the troops. Senge suggests that this archetype is deeply rooted

in the western psyche and in an individualistic and non-systemic worldview (Senge, 2002). Senge's recipe for effective leader-practitioners stands in direct contrast with the traditional leader and calls for leaders who are based in learning organizations as designers, stewards and teachers, where they are responsible for the development and nurturing of learning communities.

In our view these perspectives on leadership and learning organizations link closely to the key determinants in the BES study particularly in the emphasis on the role of leaders in the creation of learning communities. The question that emerges is how do school leaders create such a learning community? The following section describes how the NGO leadership project initiated the development of just such a learning organization.

Background to the NGO Leadership Project

The NGO Leadership Project was initiated in 2008 as part of a PhD study to explore the research questions outlined above in the introduction. The project was specifically targeted towards increasing leadership capability in adolescent focused non government organizations (NGO's) in Aotearoa New Zealand. These organizations were in a range of settings including alternative education, recreation, and residential and community therapeutic settings. Directors in these organizations have critical roles in leading organizations that focus on the development of young people and the complexity and intricacies of their leadership roles have not previously been studied in depth in New Zealand.

Jim Collins, author of the best selling business leadership books Built to Last and Good to Great, also wrote an addendum to the second of these which he called Good to Great in Social Sectors. In this he compared leadership in the business sector to leadership in the social or nonprofit sectors and stated:

“We must reject the idea – well intentioned, but dead wrong – that the primary path to greatness in the social sectors is to become ‘more like a business’. Indeed tomorrows great leaders will come from the social sectors, not the other way around (Collins, 2005).”

It is also been his experience, when working as a director in this field, that leaders are very committed to and curious about optimizing their leadership but often have limited engagement with current leadership models developed in other sectors. This was perhaps due to time constraints, access to relevant information, an overwhelming volume of leadership literature, or models developed in other countries and not contextualized in Aotearoa, New Zealand.

This project involved directors of approximately 25 adolescent focused NGO's exploring their leadership beliefs and values and the ways these values were expressed in their leadership roles. The following research question focuses on this area:

What beliefs, values and actions characterize leaders in adolescent focused NGO's in Aotearoa, New Zealand?

The process that guided this exploration was Appreciative Inquiry which involved the leaders exploring and reflecting on their own leadership beliefs, values and actions in a collaborative manner with peers in similar roles over a 12 month period. The content of the leadership beliefs, values and actions of the NGO directors is the subject of another paper. In this paper the key focus is on the evolving process that brought the directors together in the research and the second research question:

How does exploring NGO leadership through appreciative inquiry impact our practice?

Through the application of Appreciative Inquiry, the participating directors collaborated to create a vibrant learning community that was developed over 12 months and is now self sustaining beyond the duration of the Ph.D. project. Feedback as to what was useful and critical in the creation of this learning community is articulated in the sections that follow. In addition, through their own leadership actions, the directors involved also focused on re-creating their own organizations as learning communities. This paper draws on these experiences to provide insights into how a similar process could be incorporated in creating a learning community in a school setting, either with groups of senior leaders exploring their leadership, and/or with whole staff teams in discrete schools exploring professional goals such as promoting student achievement or implementing the New Zealand Curriculum.

Implementation of Appreciative Inquiry Processes

Appreciative Inquiry grew out of the work of David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva in the 1980's who originally developed the approach as a conflict resolution process (Harkness, 2004). Appreciative Inquiry involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate and heighten positive potential. It is in its broadest focus a systematic discovery of what gives 'life' to a living system when it is most alive, most effective and most constructively capable in economic, ecological and human terms (Cooperrider, Sorensen, Whitney and Yaeger, 2000). Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations and the world around them (Harkness).

The emphasis on appreciation sprang from the concept of the ‘appreciative eye’ in art, where it is said that within each piece of art one may locate beauty. Appreciative Inquiry is an exploratory process for creating positive change and fostering intentional learning and growth. Appreciative Inquiry identifies the best of what is happening in the present moment to pursue what is possible in the future (Harkness, 2004). The purpose of an inquiry is: “the creation of generative theory, not so much the mapping or explanations of yesterday’s world, but anticipatory articulations of tomorrow’s possibilities (Cooperrider, Sorensen, Whitney & Yaeger, 2000).”

Those involved in organizational development, leadership development or appreciative research choose to give the positive their attention. They inquire of others about stories that have life giving forces. Having heard these stories, the participants in the inquiry work to locate the themes of these stories and from these stories create shared images of a preferred future, which then leads to designing ways to create that future .

Adoption of this genre of methodology is supported by Denzin and Lincoln (2000) where they discuss the emergence of methodologies such as Appreciative Inquiry and Bricolage and suggest that these new initiatives could wholly reconstitute the conception and practice of research.

If we abandon the traditional goal of research as the accumulation of products - static or frozen findings – and then replace it with the generation of communicative process, then a chief aim of research becomes that of establishing productive forms of relationship.

Reed (2004) in Appreciative Inquiry – Research for Change, describes that the two key characteristics of ‘focus on the positive’ and ‘collaboration’ in the appreciative inquiry methodology distinguish it from other processes. Appreciative Inquiry focuses on supporting people getting together to tell stories of positive development in their work that they can build on. In exploring how best to create a learning community among the leaders involved in this project are two guiding principles of Appreciative Inquiry: (1) focusing on the positive and (2) collaboration became the touch stone for all the decisions made.

Aspect 1: Focus on the positive.

This project focused exclusively on “what works, what gives life?”. Appreciative Inquiry was uniquely suited to this topic and the participants as it had the potential to bypass the deficit focus and problem saturation that is a feature of the context of many of the NGO’s with their wide ranging needs, limitations and constraints.

When you ask people appreciative questions, you touch something very important to them. They don't give politically correct answers, they give heartfelt answers because we ask soulful questions (Hammond, 2004). Appreciative Inquiry is also well aligned with the strength focused orientation such as that of the Gallup organization and with the positive psychology movement both of which are becoming more influential in research as well as being prevalent in the social service setting of NGOs.

Aspect 2: Collaboration / Inclusivity

The development of a shared space or setting in which all the participants had input into the direction, process and outcomes of the project was an important aspect. Appreciative inquiry research is described as being 'research with' instead of 'research on', with information collected being retained in the learning space, rather than being taken away to be analyzed. In this sense it is more about 'data creation' and 'data synthesizing' rather than 'data collection'.

The project had an open ended design within the parameters of the two research questions and the two appreciative inquiry aspects being described here. Participants had input into all aspects of project including the design of interview questions, selection of participants, direction of discussions, choice of input from books and speakers, analysis of data, ongoing modification of methodology and even presentation of results. This generative process was clearly articulated from the initial stages: "Where will this project end up...we will decide that together". In this way the project was inclusive of the participants and had the potential to generate rich data and enhance motivation through 'buy-in' about the process.

In addition, it was hoped that the collaborative nature and the processes used for the Appreciative Inquiry focus groups would be viewed as valuable professional development by participants. The focus was on value creation for all involved, developing both collective learning in this group, but also learning that could be utilized in each of their organizations.

Project Timeline

An Appreciative Inquiry evolves through four stages which can be articulated in the following 4 steps: Initiate - choose the positive as the focus on inquiry, introduction to ideas and process; Inquire – inquire into stories of life giving forces, locate themes that appear in these stories, what works well, what positive attributes are important and the dream of how things could be is articulated; Imagine – create shared images for a preferred future, where the ideals for the future are designed from the best of what has been discovered from the past; Innovate – explore innovative ways to create that future

(Branson, 2004). These 4 steps were implemented in this leadership project as described in the following paragraphs.

Initiate Phase: Participants were identified who met the following criteria; Directors of adolescent focused NGO's with at least 5 years leadership experience, NGO has a minimum of 5 staff and has existed for 5 years or more. Adolescent was defined broadly as 13-25 year olds. The project deliberately set out to access known networks and relationships to facilitate the research as part of an Appreciative Inquiry collaborative research process and the 'convenient sample' was achieved using 'snowball sampling' based on peer reputation and referral.

Inquire Phase: An initial one day focus group was held at Christ Church in November 2008. The first half of this day involved an overview of Appreciative Inquiry focusing on the two guiding principles of focus on positive' and 'collaboration'. This was followed by appreciative interviews where pairs of leaders interviewed each other for an hour about their leadership pathways, a peak leadership experience and the values and beliefs that underpinned this experience. They also talked about influences on their leadership and aspirations for the future. These ideas were collated in pairs and shared with the full group. Many common themes were synthesized. All paired discussions were audio recorded and group discussions were videoed. These conversations became a benchmark of their leadership which allowed the group to then explore and critique leadership perspectives from other sources.

Imagine Phase: The second half of the day involved the focus group leaders creating and deciding how they could best facilitate inquiry about their leadership in action over the next 12 months. A range of strategies were devised including leadership learning sets (groups of 3-4 leaders meeting regularly), communicating through email/conference calls and face to face meetings, an online web based forum site, input from leadership consultants and literature.

Innovate Phase: The above strategies were scheduled throughout 2009. The evolving process that emerged during that time is explored in detail in the next section.

Emerging Process

Through the application of Appreciative Inquiry, the participants in this project collaborated over 12 months to create a vibrant, creative and highly supportive learning community. As discussed in the previous section, a number of strategies were initially planned for the study. In keeping with the collaborative nature of the leadership project, these initiatives were evaluated with the participants as the study progressed and were progressively adapted to fit their needs. All decisions were informed by the intention to maximize the effectiveness of the NGO director group as a learning community.

In this section we discuss some of the specific aspects of the process that contributed to the successful development of this community. The two guiding principles of Appreciative Inquiry, ‘focus on the positive’ and ‘collaboration’, are further refined into five key strategies. Participant perspectives on each of these five strategies are:

1. Flexible and Negotiated Structure

One of the first findings was that although in the initial focus group the leaders had all agreed to be involved in leadership learning ‘sets’ (with groups of 3-4 peers meeting regularly) and these groupings had all been fully established at that time, only one of these sets had met and only on one occasion. In addition, the online web-based forum site established early in the process had only been accessed by a few of the leaders. At the second focus group the participants were unanimous in voicing: “It is difficult for us to prioritize and organize meeting with our peers” (March 2009).

In preference to the self-directed and more informal processes of learning sets and web forums, the participants requested regular day-long focus groups which they could diary in advance.

“How about you just book day long focus groups once every 3-4 months and we will diary them in advance.”

“It’s much easier to diary a day out with good notice.”

“If it doesn’t happen on the day, it doesn’t happen!”

In response to these discussions, one day focus groups were scheduled and implemented on four occasions throughout the year. The purpose of these groups was to create a think-tank or incubator where the leaders could explore their leadership collectively and critique leadership perspectives from other sources. This would allow them to reflect on the implementation of leadership strategies in their respective workplaces. It would also allow them to compare and contrast the prescriptions of the leadership literature with their own experience and potentially allow the groups to identify key points of distinction regarding leading an adolescent focused NGO in New Zealand.

The groups were highly successful both in terms of participant motivation, attendance and learning outcomes. They quickly developed into rich learning communities that were highly valued by the participants.

“It has been a great initiative, getting people with our collective focus together. It has been great to interact with other leaders I didn’t know.”

“Being able to take time out from ‘normal’ routine to learn, reflect and be fired-up about my place in leadership and our place as a group in leadership.”

A high level of commitment to these focus groups was observed which was a little surprising given the intensely busy schedules these directors operated within. It seemed that the directors were becoming highly engaged with the group and with the process so were prepared to diary these meetings as priorities in their planners.

“I am really growing in the process and I want more of it!”

As stated earlier, participants also had input into all aspects of project including the design of interview questions, selection of participants, direction of discussions, choice of input from books and speakers, analysis of data, ongoing modification of methodology and even presentation of results. The negotiation of these areas also contributed to the growth of buy-in and empowerment of all involved in the project.

2. Sharing Powerful Stories

A distinctive aspect of an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach is the use of peer interviews. At the first focus group the leaders interviewed each other about their leadership background, a peak leadership experience and the values and beliefs that underpinned this experience. They also talked about influences on their leadership and aspirations for the future.(Appendix 1 contains a copy of the question guide.)

“This was the best part for me, reflecting on my own leadership style and approach.”

“The one-on-one interview was helpful for me to understand my own leadership. Many personal insights have come from our discussions.”

At the first focus group, the high level of engagement was very noticeable as the pairs of leaders returned to the larger group after having interviewed each other and shared their leadership stories. This was due in part to using questions that were framed in positive terms and answered as a narrative. Reed (2004) states that AI questions must have two parts: (1) evoke a real personal experience and narrative story that helps the participants to identify and draw on their best learning from the past and (2) allow the interviewer to go beyond the past to envision the best possibilities for the future.

“When you ask people appreciative questions, you touch something very important to them. They don’t give politically correct answers, they give heartfelt answers because we ask soulful questions (Hammond, 2004).”

Appreciative Inquiry involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate and heighten positive potential. The nature of the interview questions accessed stories that surfaced the passions and core motivations of the leaders. However, it was also significant that the interviews were mutual, i.e.: the participants interviewed each other. This then personalized the process, created a connection with another leader and increased engagement in the project process.

"Why do I keep coming back? It is rich in allowing good communication with others in similar roles. It clarifies and renews what we know."

"One of the most interesting conversations was related but external to the exercise, so the environment and context set up this possibility brilliantly."

"I really valued talking with other leaders."

In the final focus group this structure of peer interviews was again adopted. However, this time the questions were focused on each leader's narrative of the changes to his/her leadership thinking and practice over the duration of the project. Again, these interviews were highly engaging and it was evident that a lot of learning had occurred during the project.

"There were many gems that I can take away and reflect on in my leadership."

3. Cycles of Exploration

This process was cyclical, generative, iterative, organic, and emergent with some of this reflection happening during the focus group while a lot of other experimentation occurred in the interval between scheduled focus groups. The process also involved a number of stimuli and inputs that were fed into the process. A number of loops are described below along with reflections from the participants relevant to that loop.

One such loop related to the appreciative interviews in the Inquire phase at focus group 1. Following the interviews discussed above, each pair collated the key ideas emerging from their discussion and shared them with the full group. Many common themes were synthesized. The recorded interviews were then transcribed and each of these were coded and synthesized into eight initial themes. Numerous participant quotes from each of these themes were presented back to the participants at focus group 2 in the form of large posters, a process which is also known as member checking. In small groups the leaders were able to read the quotes from their colleagues and reflect on the themes. These response conversations were recorded on large posters and also on dictaphones and the responses fed back into the process so the other participants could reflect on these again.

“Amazing amount of knowledge and experience spread over these posters.”

“It seems incredibly important that the taonga (treasure) that exists here reflects the way forward not only for the NGO sector but also in the greater planet that we inhabit.”

Another loop that was developed was input from key leadership consultants in various areas of leadership. These included Peter Cammock at focus group 2 and 3 in the area of Leadership vs. Management, Positive Leadership, and the Tasks and Skills of Leadership. At focus group 4, Colin Williams from UC Education Plus presented on the Kiwi Leadership for Principals model and Professor Angus McFarlane presented on Educultural Approaches to Leadership.

“I found the holistic approach inspiring, interesting and motivating. Very challenging questions, I seem to be so caught up in the doing that I don’t stop to reflect on the whys.”

A wide range of leadership literature was also made available and most leaders took a number of books away to read, as well as wrote book reviews on the books which were then distributed to the group. Some of these book reviews were also presented to the participants at subsequent focus groups.

This iterative process resulted in increasing depth in the analysis and built up successive layers of material based on this reflection. It also contributed to the sense of ownership that the participants felt as they were able to collectively critique all the source information with regards to their applicability to their individual settings.

“Really useful process – fascinating, inspiring, an honor.”

4. Individual and Collective Reflection

Implicit in these cycles of exploration was the act of reflection on the material that was being fed into the process. This reflection was structured both individually and collectively. As part of the project each of the leaders chose a leadership focus to explore in their own setting. Time was allowed at each focus group to discuss how this was progressing and what they were learning in the process. A crucial part of the process was collecting and capturing the experiences, thoughts, comments and questions from participants over this time frame. To assist with this data collection, at each meeting, the participants reflected individually on the relevance of the information discussed using a technique called ‘one-pagers’.

One-pagers involve writing one page about an idea, collection of related ideas, action taken or a discussion point. They were generated when key ideas began to synthesize and connections are made to other learning (Mayo, Henson, & Smith, 2008). There are few structural rules with one-pagers except limiting their length to one page.

“One-pagers have been a useful way to reflect while it’s still at the forefront of my mind.”

“I am enthused to read more, reflect more!”

These one-pagers were then collated and once again this material was fed back into the collective reflection cycle. (Mayo et al, 2008) have found that as a communication and reflective tool, one-pagers are useful and can be accessible to all partners in a research process. The function of one-pagers was to create additional possibilities for feedback on each area and they contributed to the body of data on both personal and collective learning.

“Rich conversations, different perspectives showed in each interview, space for discussion and debate.”

“It’s the creation of a place from which to reflect. We have developed an inspiring, creative, exciting space to share.”

At each focus group discussions also use structured reflection allowing participants to learn from each other’s experiences. These conversations were recorded to allow key topics to be readdressed at subsequent focus groups.

5. Significant Time Frame

Another finding from this project was the importance of the extended time frame within which the directors could develop their learning community together and effectively explore their leadership. As discussed in the section on flexible and negotiated structure, the preferred process in this NGO Leadership Project was ongoing focus groups with opportunities in between these sessions to reflect and experiment in their work places over a 12 month period. It is clear that the significant time frame, as well as application of the guiding principles of positive focus and collaboration, were crucial in the creation of an ongoing learning community to create sustainable change.

In addition, through their own leadership actions, some of the directors began focusing on re-creating their own organization as learning communities. For example, as a result of the process in the focus groups and reading one of the leadership books available in the project, one director decided to implement some of these strategies in her next staff training day. This involved a day structured around ‘focusing on the positive’

both individually and collectively. She was then able to reflect on this process at the next focus group with the NGO Project.

“Taking the time out of work to reflect, to get organized and to develop new ideas – this is exactly what this process has allowed me to do.”

“Engaging in a combination of intellectualizing and very practical talk about ourselves as leaders.”

The significant time frame allowed time for professional relationships to grow between the directors, with a subsequent increase in trust and lowering of competitive and protectionist behaviors between the organizations. In an exciting and significant development, in the last focus group, the directors began to brainstorm ways in which they could continue to collaborate after the completion of this project.

“It would be great to work on a collaborative group project.”

These ideas are only in infancy as yet but already two examples of these kinds of partnerships have been initiated. It is suggested that perhaps beyond the primary focus of this project on collective leadership exploration, that there was the potential to see significant changes in the way the NGO sector functions as a whole.

Creating Learning Communities in Schools

The following section discusses some possibilities as to how the challenge of the development of such ‘learning communities’ might be approached in a school setting. The NGO Leadership Project involved the development of a learning community, whereas schools often describe such a process as a professional learning group.

Such a professional learning group (PLG) process could be used at a number of levels within a school setting. For example, a PLG with senior staff focused on leadership in a similar manner to the NGO Project (Conner & Mayo, 2009). Another application could be a PLG with the whole staff focusing on a goal relevant to the entire schools community. Examples of this include implementing aspects of the New Zealand Curriculum; i.e. effective pedagogy or key competencies or perhaps a student management focus such as restorative justice.

As stated earlier, the BES states that in order to establish such communities, leaders may need to challenge or change cultures that are not focused on collegial discussion of the relationship between what is taught and what is learned (Robinson et al, 2009, pp. 42). This article suggests that the two Appreciative Inquiry guiding principles of ‘positive focus’ and ‘collaboration’ are useful in achieving this.

More specifically, by facilitating a ‘flexible and negotiated structure’, teachers could be given the power and choice to co-create a customized exploration process which works for them. It is impossible to predict what this structure might look like from the outset but it would be sure to take into account the pressured timeframes that teachers work within. It may also involve the compositions of groups, the type of input accessed, the time of the day and week, etc. This collaborative process is likely to build ownership in the learning process and in the implementation of the strategies in their classrooms.

Teachers could engage in peer interviews, ‘sharing powerful stories’ from their own teaching, what motivates them as educators, uncovering their values and beliefs around their role in education. In the NGO leadership project this allowed the directors to bypass the deficit focus which is often prevalent and focus instead on their underlying motivations. Participants found this highly engaging and created significant commitment to the learning process.

Ongoing ‘cycles of exploration’ could easily be adapted to a school setting. Inputs could include all those used in this project and could also involve teachers sharing case studies and anecdotes of their classroom practice with each other. An essential element in this is the feeling of commitment and emotional safety in this process as people would be asked to openly share their successes and their struggles. The BES (2009) states that associated with effective professional communities is a strong sense of collective responsibility and accountability for student achievement and well being (Robinson, 2009, pp. 42). This collective responsibility can best be generated by intrinsic motivation by connecting with teachers core values as above rather than solely by extrinsic motivators such as compliance and performance appraisal.

Teachers are very familiar with ‘individual reflection’ but perhaps ‘collective reflection’ is not as widely utilized. The process negotiated above would need to consider what methods of collective reflection would be most useful. The powerful combination of individual reflective practice followed by collaborative group reflection is likely to create a learning community as described by Senge.

“The organizations that will readily excel in the future will be the organizations that discover how to tap people’s commitment and capacity to learn at all levels of the organization (Senge, 2002).”

Another interesting observation is that it seems essential to have congruence between the content being explored (i.e. collaborative leadership, effective pedagogy, etc) and the process used to explore this (i.e. the learning community must show same characteristics such as collaboration, reflection, etc). It is likely that if there is a mismatch between the ‘content’ and the ‘process’ then the credibility of the learning process is compromised.

A ‘significant time frame’ for the creation of this learning community is not difficult to achieve in a school setting as most schools already have regular professional development built into their week. The challenge is more likely to be maintaining a sense of momentum and energy over an extended period. One finding from this study is the importance of not just good concentrated input with a number of short workshops but more importantly the creation of an ongoing learning community to create sustainable change.

It is the author’s experience that professional learning and development in secondary schools is seldom planned in the manner outlined above. Most significantly, a ‘high trust, high accountability’ environment which gives teachers agency in their own learning is most likely to lead to the development of a highly creative and productive learning community where a school can comprehensively address complex issues. Creating a community that learns how to improve student success (Robinson, 2009, pp.120).

Conclusion

The Best Evidence Synthesis for Principals (2009) identifies “promoting and participating in teacher learning and development” as the key determinant linking principal leadership actions to student achievement in secondary schooling. It goes on to elaborate this as a focus on “creating a community that learns how to improve student success (Robinson et al, 2009, pp. 120).”

This paper makes suggestions for leadership strategies that create the conditions to develop a similar learning community. It synthesizes outcomes from an innovative leadership project that involved the directors of adolescent focused NGO’s in Aotearoa, New Zealand who used Appreciative Inquiry processes to explore their own leadership as they developed a ‘learning community’.

The two guiding principles of ‘positive focus’ and ‘collaboration’ enabled growth trajectories where participants gained an agency to co-create a highly productive learning space. Five key strategies are identified: flexible and negotiated structure, sharing powerful stories, cycles of exploration, individual and collective reflection and significant time frame. The paper makes suggestions for how these strategies could be used in the development of such a ‘learning community’ in a school setting.

APPENDIX 1: QUESTION GUIDE FOR APPRECIATIVE INTERVIEWS

1. What attracted you to this work?

Think back to when you first became involved in leadership of an NGO. What was it that attracted you to role? What did you hope to achieve personally and professionally? What were you passionate about?

2. Peak Leadership Experience

Think back through your career as a NGO leader and locate a moment or period that was a high point. This should be a time when you felt a sense of pride, accomplishment and true satisfaction in your work.

- a) Describe the situation. What happened? What was the result? What was your role in creating this experience? What other people and factors contributed to this exceptional moment?
- b) How has this experience influenced you as a leader? What conscious choices do you make as a result?

3. Your Values

Let's talk for a moment about some of the things that matter deeply to you, specifically about the nature of your work and your organization.

- a. Without being too humble, describe what you value most about the qualities you bring to your work?
- b. When you think about your current role, what beliefs and values guide you in your leadership?
- c. What /who have been the key influences in shaping your beliefs and values?

4. *Image of the Future*

Imagine it is a year from now and you are feeling really fulfilled in your leadership role. Your team is delivering excellent outcomes and both you and your team are inspired and motivated by your work.

- a) Describe your leadership role within the team. What characteristics are you demonstrating?
- b) What are people saying in your organization, outside of your organization?
- c) What are two or three small steps *you* might take to start making this vision a reality?

5. *Inspiring Leadership*

Think of the best demonstration of leadership that you have experienced. (i.e. when you personally were not the leader). This should be a time when you felt inspired and motivated to fulfill your role to the best of your abilities.

- a) Who was/were the leader(s)? What characteristics did they have that inspired and motivated you?
- b) Describe a specific incident when you saw this person demonstrate this leadership.
- c) What was the impact of their leadership on you and your behavior?
- d) What learning(s) about leadership have you taken from this experience?

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